Memories as Mirrors:
German Women of the Holocaust in Early Twenty-First Century American Cinema

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Master's Thesis
Master of European Studies
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February 2020
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HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

Tiedekunta – Fakultet – Faculty Faculty of Arts	Koulutusohjelma – Utbildningsprogram – Degree Programme Master's Degree Programme in European Studies: Area and Cultural Studies	
Opintosuunta – Studieinriktning – Study Track Area and Cultural Studies		
Tekijä – Författare – Author Roberta Estus		
Työn nimi – Arbetets titel – Title Memories as Mirrors: German Women of the Holocaust in Early Twenty-First Century American Cinema		
Työn laji – Arbetets art – Level Master's Thesis	Aika – Datum – Month and year February 2020	Sivumäärä– Sidoantal – Number of pages 59

Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

This thesis focuses on examining American culture in the early twenty-first century via its popular culture depiction of German culture in the 1940s. Film is used as a means to represent, recreate, and reaffirm cultural values; it provides evidence of deeply rooted beliefs and preferences. Representations on screen reflect present realities, rather than historical fact. By showing history in a certain light, we are actually showing ourselves in a certain light.

In this thesis I use the categories of witness, accomplice, and perpetrator to examine three Hollywood films from 2008 and 2009 depicting German women during the Holocaust: *The Reader, The Boy in the Striped Pajamas,* and *Inglourious Basterds*. I identify these archetypes as they are displayed in the films and analyze the way that history is used to reflect contemporary values, focusing on the gendered aspect of war guilt.

The way that female characters are depicted in these three films says something about the prevailing expectations for women in early twenty-first century American culture, namely that they lack the agency that being responsible or guilty requires. Guilt implies full agency. If a person does not have agency, they are not guilty but instead either complicit or another victim of the real guilty party. By denying women agency, we excuse them from guilt. Prevailing beliefs about the eternal masculine and feminine are maintained when we choose to ignore the nuances of history, opting instead to reiterate simplistic binaries that satisfy audience demands.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords
Agency - Gender - Guilt - Historiography - Holocaust - Kriegsschuld - Memory - Popular Culture - Representation - Täterforschung

Säilytyspaikka – Förvaringställe – Where deposited

Muita tietoja – Övriga uppgifter – Additional information

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History is nothing but the succession of individual generations, each exploiting the materials, capital, and forces of production bequeathed to it by all preceding generations. On the one hand, history is the continuing transmittal of activity under entirely different circumstances, and on the other hand, it is the modification of old circumstances with an entirely different activity.

-Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels[1]

[1] Glaser 1981, 154.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Preface

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, the Third Reich - and more specifically the Holocaust - has featured prominently in both academic studies and popular media. Following the media coverage of the Eichmann trial in the 1960s, academic interest expanded to include *Täterforschung*, or perpetrator studies, and the idea of *Kriegsschuld***,** or war guilt.[2] By default, *Täterforschung*, *Kriegsschuld*, and the Holocaust were understood to be male matters. This changed at a 1983 conference at New York's Stern College when "feminist scholars from a variety of disciplines challenged the received body of knowledge about the Holocaust, which they quickly discovered, was as male-centered as the body of knowledge in history and other subjects and disciplines."[3] The conference was well attended and "shaped the field and established the parameters" of "gendered approaches to the Holocaust."[4]

Presentations at this conference focused on the female would-be victims of the Holocaust but in 1987, historian Claudia Koonz introduced perpetrator studies to this new field of gendered Holocaust studies with her book *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics.* Koonz expanded on the ever-asked question 'What did your father do during the war?' by asking 'What did your mother do during the war?'. She voiced the "growing realization that the history of the Holocaust is incomplete without responses to questions that focus explicitly on what women did… during those dark years."[5] Koonz argued that women should share the burden and responsibility of *Kriegsschuld*. As members of society, they too had a role in shaping history.[6] In a 1992 response, historian Gisela Bock

[2] Perpetrator studies remained a niche field throughout the Cold War. It picked up after 1990 but is still an under-researched area. See Koonz 2010, 149, 157. For one such early work in the genre, see the collection of perpetrators' first hand accounts and personal photographs compiled by Klee, Dressen, and Reiss, 1991.
[3] Baer & Goldenberg 2003, xvii.
[4] Baer & Goldenberg 2003, xvii-xviii.
[5] Roth 2003, 13.
[6] Koonz 1987; see also Grossman 1991.

maintained that this shared guilt was unfair due to the patriarchal nature of the Third Reich. This strand of the "*Historikerstreit* [historian's quarrel]… represented a progression in the feminist understanding of the Nazi era and it took place within the wider scope of… debates on guilt and responsibility."[7] We know the Third Reich was a society that oppressed women, but as "all German women were required to work and contribute to the war effort, in paid and unpaid positions,"[8] surely they were not without sin.[9]

Works of popular culture, including cinema, provide a medium for cultures to process their relationship to history. According to cultural studies framework, as pioneered by Stuart Hall in the early 1980s, artifacts of popular culture such as widely-read novels and widely-watched television and films can be closely read as evidence of the culture's attitudes and values. These "readings… anticipate the institutional, political and ideological order"[10] of the society. In other words, analysis of a film will necessarily reveal a window into the time and place in which it was made and consumed - critically to this thesis, *not* the time and place in which the film is set. While a film may present itself as historical in nature, focusing on separate time and place, its cultural undertones will always point back to its era of production and consumption. History, although it appears to be "neutral, objective, and legitimate knowledge,"[11] is inescapably clouded with the subjectivity of the historian (or filmmaker) as imprinted by their own culture. In this way, depictions of historical events in cinema are, in fact, a mirror reflecting back the attitudes of the generating culture; the "films are re-readable as contemporary constructions with impacts on our present understanding of reality and ourselves."[12]

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[7] Lenz & Heinsohn 2008, 141; see also Bock 1992 and Koonz 2010.
[8] Lower 2013, 8.
[9] Not to mention the fact that "women comprised about 48 percent of the Nazi voters," as referenced by Bock 1998, 86.
[10] Hall 1980, 128-38.
[11] McLeod & Thomson 2009, 4.
[12] Lenz & Heinsohn 2008, 147.

Accordingly, since **"**texts or traditions are markers of social realities,"[13] one can read into contemporary gender issues from the way men and women are portrayed in these films, which function as historical texts. These "...(re)presentations of history *generate agency*… By asking how men and women are positioned as historical agents or passive objects, a 'gendered order of history' becomes visible."[14] Are men shown predominantly in active or passive roles? Are women? How is gender performed, and does it vary with the character's status as hero or antihero, protagonist or antagonist? Unpacking character behavior, and whether it is designed to be received as normalized or subversive, in this manner leads to an understanding of the gender expectations of the target audience's culture.

Despite having happened nearly eighty years ago[15] and half a globe away, the Third Reich - and more specifically the Holocaust committed under it's guidance - weighs heavily on the American psyche up to present day. According to a 2018 survey referenced in newspaper *The New York Times*, 93% of Americans think that "all students should learn about the Holocaust at school."[16] There is much talk about how to preserve the memory of what happened and this concern is not limited to academia. We're worried that memory might be fading but "in the United States, and to some extent elsewhere as well, historical memory of the Nazi extermination of the Jews [has] moved to the mainstream of national culture, with memorial museums being founded in many cities, and increased attention in the mass media."[17] The Holocaust features quite regularly in popular culture references such as film, but it is important to be conscious of the biases the present brings to representations of the past.

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[13] Espagne 2013, 38.
[14] Lenz & Heinsohn 2008, 134.
[15] It will be interesting to see, however, how attitudes towards the Holocaust change as time passes and "*mèmoire* is transformed into *histoire*." It is said that the horizon for the "everyday form of collective memory… does not extend more than eighty to (at the very most) one hundred years into the past, which equals three or four generations." The next twenty years, therefore, will likely be a pivotal era for the field. Assman 1995, 127-128.
[16] Astor 2018.
[17] Evans 2015, 437.

I completed my own primary, secondary, and post-secondary education in America. When I specialized in German Studies at the Bachelor's level I began to notice a discrepancy between the representations of the Holocaust in German and American academia, and again in German and American wider popular culture and mass media. The American depictions were, well, very American.[18] Further specializing in Area and Cultural Studies at the Master's level, I gained greater insight into the way "our culture writes in us, or through us, whether we like it or not."[19] Here it dawned on me: these contemporary American depictions of the Holocaust seemed to have as much to say about contemporary America as they did about the Holocaust, if not somehow more. By studying the divergent ways the past is portrayed, I have realized that "by deconstructing both the 'text' of the past and the 'texts' of all previous histories, new histories can be created in accord with the race / class / gender interests of their creators - or with the political and ideological dispositions that historians conceive to be in accord with those interests."[20] The intersection of twenty-first century American culture and 1940s German culture is an understudied but interesting junction, particularly when it comes to gender roles. It is this cultural heritage that inspired this thesis, and it is from this cultural heritage that I write.

I would like to clarify two terms that will show up repeatedly in this thesis: Holocaust and *Kriegsschuld*. By 'Holocaust' I will be refering to the Nazi engineered genocide of millions of Jews, Roma, homosexuals, those with perceived mental and physical disabilities, and others deemed "dishonorable"[21] beginning with the election of Adolf Hitler in 1933, ramping up in 1941 with the implementation of the General Plan for the East and finally coming to an end in 1945 with Allied liberation.[22] In Jewish Studies circles it is often referred

[18] For a comparison of German and American representations of national historiography and "nation-centered social history," see Schaser 2010, 40-41. See also Hagemann and Quataert 2010.
[19] Mauranen 1994, 26.
[20] Himmelfarb 1997, 168.
[21] Evans 2015, 61.
[22] For a collection of diverse first hand accounts of this era, as told from the perspective of both German Jews and Gentiles, see Johnson and Reuband 2006.

to as the Shoah, but in broader American culture it is known as the Holocaust, a convention I will maintain in this thesis. *Kriegsschuld* is a German term that directly translates to 'war guilt' and specifically means German responsibility for the Holocaust, rather than a broader unease about war in general. It has saturated the German cultural landscape since the close of the Second World War, overshadowing everything from literature to political policy. Though unnamed and perhaps little known as a phenomenon in American culture, *Kriegsschuld* nonetheless lies deep in the American psyche. German history, in American popular media, has become shorthand for Nazi history, which has become shorthand for Holocaust history.

In 2008, two films were released based on novels of the same names: *The Reader* and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas.* They were released by American production and distribution companies, thus intended for widespread American consumption. Both films center around German women in the midst of the Holocaust. The following year, another Hollywood film depicting the Holocaust, *Inglourious Basterds*, was released with a greater emphasis on the German male.

In her 2013 book *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*, historian Wendy Lower examines the different ways that women "aided and abetted the destruction process."[23] She sets forth three categories: witness, accomplice, and perpetrator. Witnesses were those who saw what was happening but did nothing to stop it, such as military officers' wives. Accomplices were those who helped the process but were not directly involved in killing, such as secretaries. Perpetrators were those who directly carried out the horrors, such as military officers.

This thesis will be focused on examining American culture in the early twenty-first century via its depiction of German culture in the 1940s. The way that women are depicted in these three films says something about the prevailing expectations for women in early

[23] Roth 2003, 8.

twenty-first century American culture, namely that they should lack the agency that being responsible or guilty requires. Despite the gains many American women have made in the professional realm since the women's movement of the 1970s, they remain underrepresented in positions of authority and agency. Guilt implies full agency. If a person does not have agency, they are not guilty but instead are either complicit or another victim of the real guilty party. If we view the characters in these films as examples of Lower's archetypes and examine them through the lens of feminist film theory we will see that they reflect the current state of female gender ideals at the time and place of the films' production and consumption. While the films were released and viewed worldwide, I will only focus on their reception in the United States. Although the roles featured are historical, the depiction actually says more about cultural ideals in the time and place the films were made than in the time and place they are set.

In this thesis I will apply Wendy Lower's three categories of German women's role in the Holocaust (witness, accomplice, perpetrator) to examples from recent American popular culture. I will examine these archetypes as they are portrayed by the films and analyze how the way that history is portrayed is a reflection of contemporary values, focusing on the gendered aspect of *Kriegsschuld*, or war guilt. The role of women in the Third Reich is an under researched area, but even less researched is the role of the female perpetrator. I feel that the reason for this relates to American discomfort in challenging what we see as 'female' or 'female behavior' (more or less the opposite of a war criminal).

Since *Schindler's List* was released in 1993, Americans have shown a taste for strong male leads in stories of the Holocaust, be they perpetrators or heroes of the resistance.[24] The popularity of *The Reader* and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas,* however, show that American audiences also appreciate a female lead - but one who is weaker and less in control of her own destiny. Interestingly, *Inglourious Basterds*, which grossed in the

[24] For more on the curious popularity of this "genre that has less to do with history than with the perceived expectations of moviegoers," see Scott 2008.

US more than three times as much as *The Reader* and ten times as much as *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, includes examples of both strong male and female leads as liberators and resistors, but shows only a male perpetrator and female witnesses and accomplices. In order to understand early twenty-first century liberal American idealization of the Holocaust and its expectations about the status of women, this thesis will compare and contrast the depictions of women and men through these categories of witness, accomplice, and perpetrator in these differently grossing films. Ultimately, these films and their relative popularity with American audiences indicate that while Americans have some interest in women as witnesses and accomplices to the Holocaust and a great deal of interest in seeing men as perpetrators of the Holocaust, the absence of depictions of female perpetrators implies they have little interest in seeing women in this role. It is still, in our minds, a role reserved for men.

1.2 Methodology

In the sections that follow, I will use Lower's categories of witness, accomplice, and perpetrator to examine three Hollywood films from 2008 and 2009 portraying German women during the Holocaust: *The Reader, The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, and *Inglourious Basterds*. I will identify within them depictions of Lower's three categories of female participants of the Holocaust. Through the duel lens of gender studies and feminist film theory, I will also analyze these roles in the context of early twenty-first century American culture and its perceptions of the Holocaust.

This analysis is largely qualitative although I do rely on quantitative data for box-office receipts and IMDB ratings. For further evidence of American reception I draw on reviews from Manohla Dargis of the *New York Times.* By using reviews by the same film critic for all three films, I control for regional and personal bias.

My main method of gender analysis relies on the work of Judith Butler and Pierre Bourdieu. My main method of cinematographic analysis relies on an adaptation of Laura Mulvey's theory of the dominance of the male gaze in cinema. Her focus is on the heteronormative inflection of that gaze while I use a parallel strategy to look at how the gaze demands female passivity.

1.3 Historical theory: Wendy Lower

In the thirty years since Koonz and Bock added the intersectional layer of gender to the *Historikerstreit*, American historian Wendy Lower has worked to navigate this grey area German women occupied between victim and perpetrator, culminating in her 2013 book *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields.* The thesis of her argument is that while women certainly held a separate but unequal position in the Third Reich, "the entire population of German women (almost forty million in 1939) cannot be considered a victim group… Just as the agency of women in history more generally is underappreciated, here too - and perhaps even more problematically, given the moral and legal implications - the agency of women in the crimes of the Third Reich has not been fully elaborated and explained."[25] She sheds some light on this under researched area by exploring the umbrella terms of 'guilty' or 'responsible' in more nuance. It is a widely repeated trope that the Holocaust was not simply the domain of a few bad people doing bad things, but of a great deal of good people who did nothing. Where is women's place in this trope? It is agreed "that the systems that make mass murder possible would not function without the broad participation of society, and yet nearly all histories of the Holocaust leave out half of those who populated that society, as if women's history happens somewhere else."[26] Lower challenges modern beliefs of femininity by expanding the historical narrative of the Holocaust to include German women as well as men. Lower has proposed that German women

[25] Lower 2013, 10.
[26] Lower 2013, 14.

generally fell into one of three categories: witness, accomplice, or perpetrator. These categories provide a structural framework with which to understand German women's actions during the Third Reich and therefore a structural framework with which to assess their agency and guilt (and as we will see later, we can use the same categories to evaluate future representations of these women, as well as the cultural significance behind the choice to portray the women as members of particular categories).

Lower's first category is that of witness. The witness is the woman who, though she pulled no triggers herself, was to varying degrees aware that others did. This included women residing both on the homefront and in the eastern occupied territories. The category includes women in a diverse array of roles such as seamstresses, teachers, performers, and also women who were not employed but accompanied their husbands to posts in the eastern territories. Women in this, "the largest category"[27] were often not prepared for the "moment of realization"[28] and had differing reactions to the sights. Lower states that "...witnessing the realities of the Holocaust had usually several effects: it hardened their determination; it confused or eroded their sense of morality… ; and it triggered the search for outlets to escape what was unpleasant or repulsive, for opiates such as sexual pleasure and alcohol… Those who tried to stay away from what was happening around them found few places untouched by the war's devastation, and little solace."[29] The women in the witness category behaved in a passive manner, rather than an active manner: instead of causing things to happen, things happened around them. They may have agreed or disagreed with official policy to differing degrees, but these opinions had little effect because they remained in a state of essential inaction. Some women, clouded by the plausible deniability of the daily grind, took longer to put the pieces of the puzzle together: "only in hindsight did they recognize (or admit) the massive scope of what was happening around them, along with

[27] Lower 2013, 95.
[28] Lower 2013, 81.
[29] Lower 2013, 85.

their own contribution to the regime's criminal policies."[30] Still, because they were present at the scene of the crime they were complicit.

Lower's second category is that of the accomplice. The accomplice is one of the "many women [who] were happy to don a uniform and embrace their newfound adulthood and civic identity in the movement."[31] This included women residing both on the homefront and in the eastern occupied territories. The category is mainly comprised of women employed by the state, either in clerical roles (even forming forty percent of the Gestapo's Vienna and Berlin offices by the end of the war[32]) or in the S.S. as camp workers and lower level guards (around half a million "deployed in various areas of the military"[33]). They behaved with slightly more agency than those in the witness category, because they had to "make a personal choice"[34] to volunteer for their positions, but after the war "most claimed that they were 'just doing their job.'"[35] Accomplices were not the engineers of genocide but nonetheless "constituted a critical labor force,"[36] without which the Holocaust would not have been possible.

Lower's third category is that of the perpetrator. These were the women who really had blood on their hands. Although we have an image of the Holocaust occuring exclusively in gas chambers of the eastern occupied territories' concentration camps, "the first Nazi mass murderess was not the concentration camp guard but the nurse."[37] Hitler's campaign of racial hygiene began long before the "killing fields… [of the] eastern territories, where most of the worst crimes of the Reich occurred."[38] The so-called euthanasia of those deemed mentally or physically defective began in the early days of the Third Reich and it was primarily the domain of female midwives and nurses working in hospitals, care homes,

[30] Lower 2013, 78.
[31] Lower 2013, 96.
[32] Lower 2013, 99.
[33] Hagemann 2010, 75.
[34] Lower 2013, 98.
[35] Lower 2013, 99.
[36] Lower 2013, 108.
[37] Lower 2013, 120.
[38] Lower 2013, 9.

and sanatoriums. These women had a fair amount of autonomy in selecting which of their patients would become candidates for euthanasia. Significantly, nurses "were not forced to perform this task and were not punished if they rejected it."[39] After eastern expansion, the extermination of the unfit continued in concentration camps, and from the earliest days women were involved here, too. There was even a concentration camp especially for female prisoners, Ravensbrück, that was primarily staffed by women.[40] Overall, "about ten percent of… camp guards were women" as well as a smaller but still significant "proportion of the staff of the *Einsatzgruppen* (extermination squads)."[41] It is important to note that no one was drafted or randomly assigned to work in concentration camps - one had to volunteer - and "those who volunteered for the gruesome work saw these mass-murder sites as places of employment and opportunity."[42] Unlike witnesses and accomplices, the trademark of perpetrators is that they behaved with agency, they were "another kind of female character..., an expression of female activism and patriotism of the most violent and perverse kind."[43] After the war, hundreds of women were investigated, put on trial, and punished alongside men. In a report commissioned by the United States government, Robert Kempner, "one of the more famous prosecutors at the Nuremberg trials… warned U.S. occupiers in Germany that German women were fanatical supporters who had been integrated into all aspects of the government."[44] Despite both postwar evidence and academic interest in women's enthusiastic participation in the Holocaust, why does the concept remain abhorrent to the broader American public's understanding of the *Kriegsschuld*? The answer lies within our very idea of what it means to be a woman.

[39] Bock 1998, 87.
[40] For a collection of narratives recounting the minutiae of daily life at Ravensbrück, see Helm 2016.
[41] Bock 1998, 89.
[42] Lower 2013, 21.
[43] Lower 2013, 119.
[44] Lower 2013, 151.

1.4 Gender theory: Judith Butler & Pierre Bourdieu

This thesis relies on the framework established by philosopher and gender studies authority Judith Butler as defined in her 1990 work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Writing from an American perspective, Butler builds on what she terms "French theory" including Foucault.[45] I have supplemented with another French theorist, the philosopher and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, focusing mainly on his 1998 work *Masculine Domination*.

Central to Butler's theory is the concept that gender is "not expressive but performative… [and that] gender reality is created through sustained social performances."[46] There is nothing in a person's biological, anatomical sex that innately gives them typified gendered qualities: gender is purely a social construct. In other words, gendered behavior is not an expression of a person's true inner self, but rather it is a performance of culturally dictated norms. Gender identity is not so much about one's individual identity but about one's cultural identity. The expected roles of male vs female, however, are so deeply imbedded within cultural values that a person does not consciously realize they are performing anything. They are just behaving in the socially acceptable manner that has become internalized as their personally acceptable manner. In that gender expression is a "signification, not a founding act but rather a regulated process of repetition"[47], behavioral agency is restricted. We read scripts for roles we don't realize exist. In addition to recognizing the cultural basis for gender expression, Butler upholds the existence of a "gender hierarchy… [in a] heterosexual hegemony"[48] that renders men and women separate but unequal.

Bourdieu also explores this hierarchy. Like Butler, he emphasizes the use of *habitus*, habits or typified behavior, in establishing *doxa*, the so deep-seated as to be rendered

[45] Butler 1999, x.
[46] Butler 1999, 180.
[47] Butler 1999, 185.
[48] Butler 1999, xii.

invisible cultural values. As the title *Masculine Domination* would imply, Bourdieu affirms that modern western society's male-female binary is one of essential inequality in favor of the male. Our cultural assumptions favor the strength, intellect, and instrumentality of the male at the expense of the fragility, emotionality, and inculpability of the female[49]. In the labor market, too, women are "separated from men by a negative symbolic coefficient."[50] Women, in our cultural understanding (regardless of statistics often showing otherwise), occupy different professions than men, which we will see to be significant when exploring the nature of *Kriegsschuld* or war guilt. The "paradoxical submission" wrapped up in the heteronormative hierarchy results in an effect he terms "symbolic violence, a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition, recognition, or even feeling."[51] The microaggressions women bear go unnoticed because they are cultural *doxa*, truths we hold to be self-evident. Bourdieu asserts that deep-seated cultural expectations even extend to the agency of women as protagonists of their own lives, saying "masculine domination constitutes women as symbolic objects whose being (*esse*) is a being-perceived (*percipi*)...They exist first through and for the gaze of others, that is, as welcoming, attractive, and available *objects*."[52] The metaphorical gaze becomes a literal gaze when we apply it to popular cinema.

1.5 Feminist film theory: Laura Mulvey

British film theorist Laura Mulvey's seminal 1975 work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" has formed the structural framework for the interpretation of films as cultural artifacts for an entire generation of critics. Her feminist lens establishes a foundation for the discourse of power dynamics that would often go unnoticed by the casual viewer but provide

[49] Bourdieu 2001, 104-105.
[50] Bourdieu 2001, 93.
[51] Bourdieu 2001, 1-2.
[52] Bourdieu 2001, 66.

deep insight into the psyche of the filmmaker and more importantly the psyche of their intended audience. This thesis will focus on the cultural implications revealed by audience gaze.

Mulvey's theory revolves around the concept of cinematic gaze. If the film, and subsequently its characters, are meant to be watched, exactly who is implied to be doing the watching? Who gazes and who is merely gazed upon? Mulvey argues that the default audience is taken to be male, and the film is set up in a way designed to conform to his expectations and desires. The viewer is supposed to identify with the leading male character, who is the "main controlling figure."[53]

Mulvey theorizes that the (male) viewer sees the (male) protagonist as a sort of idealized mirror, reflecting back his own interpretation of himself. She explains:

> As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. A male movie star's glamorous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of the gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror.[54]

Thus, in a satisfying film, the qualities depicted of the protagonist are really qualities the spectator likes to see in himself. They represent his deepest held values.

Mulvey's interpretation relies on a strict heteronormative binary "split between active/male and passive/female,"[55] assuming a structure that has been extensively explored by western feminist academics including the likes of Bourdieu and Butler. That characters are portrayed as male or as female is not arbitrary, but holds a purpose in the way that they

[53] Mulvey 1975, 12.
[54] Mulvey 1975, 12.
[55] Mulvey 1975, 11.

will be received by the spectator. The intended viewer holds certain assumptions to be true when the character is either male or female. As soon as the character's gender is revealed, the audience unloads a mass of assumptions about the character that do not need to be further explained by the filmmaker. It's not a conscious act, but an automatic one. The cultural assumptions lie so deep that the audience, "which, as products of that world, are largely attuned to it, so that they remain unnoticed."[56] It is only with a particularly critical eye that these gendered cliches reveal themselves. As we turn to the three films from the early twenty-first century (which are, uncoincidentally, told from the point of view of a male protagonist), we will see concrete representations of these theoretical assumptions.

[56] Bourdieu 2001, 5.

Chapter 2: *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*

2.1 *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas is a 2008 film by director Mark Herman. It had an estimated budget of $12,500,000 and grossed $9,030,581 in the USA as a limited release feature.[57] It is based on a 2006 book of the same title by Irish author John Boyne. Although the director and many actors are British, the film was widely viewed in America and for the purpose of this thesis I am considering its American reception only.

The film is told from the perspective of eight-year-old Bruno, played by Asa Butterfield. By nature of his age, his world exists primarily in the domestic sphere and the cast of main characters reflects this: his father Ralf (played by David Thewlis), mother Elsa (played by Vera Farmiga), and older sister Gretel (played by Amber Beattie).[58] We are also introduced to grandparents, houseguests, household staff, a tutor, and as we will find out later, a curious neighbor.

In the beginning of the film, the scene of Bruno's idyllic childhood is set. It is 1942 Berlin and he is living the good life. He has friends, a loving family, and a nice house. He is living a life of privilege. Bruno's parents host a party and it becomes apparent that his father Ralf is a (high-ranking) Nazi soldier of some sort. In fact, he has been given a promotion! Ralf has been granted a post in the "Wild East," the "eastern *Lebensraum*, an Aryan living space abroad, … a frontier where anything was possible… [that] evoked all the violent, but also romantic, cowboys-and-Indians stereotypes in literature and film of the time."[59] It's a cause for celebration and congratulations. The family would follow Ralf to his new place of work in what is now Poland.

Bruno's 'new' life in the new house is literally and figuratively distant from his old life. While the new house has all the luxuries of the old, Bruno and his sister Gretel's world

[57] IMDB: keyword "The Boy in the Striped Pajamas."
[58] For more on the centrality of the nuclear family as the assumed basic social unit in twentieth century Germany, see Moeller 2010.
[59] Lower 2013, 35.

closes in. They get a tutor rather than going to school and their mother Elsa, clearly distressed by ‘something’ about the new location, wants to keep the children within the confines of her home - Bruno is told time and time again that he is not allowed to wander freely as he was in Berlin.

At first it’s not exactly clear the nature of Ralf’s post, nor the nature of the facility adjacent to the family home. Elsa, too, appears unaware but when she is given snippets of information she seems incredulous, dismissive, and crucially does not probe for any more details. She’s unnerved by the possibility of what lies beyond the walls of the adjacent facility and exactly what sort of operation her husband might be running there. But instead of gathering more information in hopes of settling her conscience, she willfully turns her head. Seeing his wife’s inability to handle the stark realities of the new post, or indeed of their society, Ralf decides to solve the problem by sending Elsa and the children to stay elsewhere with relatives. Then, this witness can continue on with life as if the facility had ceased operations. As soon as the head turned, the ‘problem’ would be out of sight and out of mind.

In the meantime, unbeknownst to Elsa and Ralf, Bruno has snuck out of his house and into the adjacent facility. He had encountered a man and his son both dressed in curious outfits - ‘striped pajamas’ - when they were working as laborers around the household. While secretly exploring beyond the confines of his mother’s watchful eye, Bruno comes across the fence to the facility where his father works and finds the boy, Shmuel, on the other side. On this fateful day, Schmuel cannot find his father and Bruno decides to sneak into the facility, don ‘striped pajamas,’ and help look for him. He proceeds deeper and deeper into what is now becoming apparent is a concentration camp. Elsa notices he is missing and fears the worst but it is already too late. In the crush of the crowd, Bruno has been herded towards the heart of the camp, the gas chamber, and the deed is done before the gas chamber workers realize the room also contains the precious cargo of their boss’ child.

2.2 Overview of male and female roles in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*

Although *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is told from the perspective of eight-year-old Bruno, his family are also featured prominently and here we find excellent examples of the gendered roles mentioned in section 1.4.

Bruno's father, Ralf, performs a classically male role.[60] He is a soldier who is in charge both in the workplace and at home. The cornerstone of his identity is his profession. He is an officer in every sense of the word. He appears to be well-respected professionally, he is crisply saluted as is customary and we do not hear either his superiors or subordinates speaking poorly of him. He's offered this promotion from Berlin to an installment in the eastern territories, a role that will entail a great deal of autonomy so would only have been granted to trusted and competent individuals. Ralf is depicted as someone who is very much in control; he has a high degree of agency. His family unquestioningly packs up and follows him to his new post, leaving behind the life and social support system they have built in Berlin. Ralf is the head of the household and the sole breadwinner. The family's social life seems to revolve around his colleagues and their families. Ralf is in control of his emotions. He is practical rather than sentimental - he isn't surprised or revolted by the realities of the camp, instead taking its existence to be an essential part of the bigger picture, even saying to his wife that "the fatherland we all desire - all of us, you included - cannot be achieved without work such as this."[61] Ralf is not only in control of his own emotions but aims to control those of his wife, as well, chiding her show of distaste by saying "Elsa, you believe in this, too. You want this country to be strong."[62] His loyalty is ultimately to his country, rather than to his family - when Elsa is not coping well with witnessing the seedier side of his career (the fact that he runs a concentration camp where human beings are killed and then

[60] For a discussion of the (German) soldier as a symbol of masculinity, see Hagemann 2010.
[61] *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* 2008.
[62] *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* 2008.

incinerated, the resulting smoke wafting into his own front yard) his solution is to send his family away rather than resigning from his position (or, heaven forbid, realizing that she has a point and dismantling the camp). In his actions, Ralf plays to the ever expected role of the male in early twenty-first century America: he's career-oriented, dominant, and unemotional; he has agency.

On the other hand, Bruno's mother, Elsa, performs a classically female role. The cornerstone of her identity is her role as wife and mother. Her life seems to exist entirely within the bubble of the home and family.[63] If she has any friends, interests, or goals outside of them, we the audience never see them. Her role is one of serving others, and even within her own 'castle' she is not queen. She doesn't have control of who enters or works in her home (including a subordinate soldier who acts as a bodyguard and camp prisoners who act as laborers, about whom she complains to Ralf, saying 'there was one of them in our kitchen"[64] only to be met with a dismissive sigh). Elsa always has to accommodate her husband's needs, never the opposite. She follows him to his new post and a home is already set up waiting for them. She was never given a say in whether they move, where they move to, or how their home will be. Even Elsa's children don't take her as an authority figure - Bruno disobeys her request that he stay within the house and front garden as soon as he can. When Elsa makes her needs known - that she is uncomfortable with the camp and having to witness it - she is portrayed as mentally unstable rather than someone who has the moral high ground. It doesn't occur to Ralf that her concerns might be legitimate (let alone the possibility that she could lead some kind of resistance movement). She's an inconvenience and needs to be sent away.[65] In her actions, Elsa plays to the expected role

[63] For more on the placement of women in "this 'female' realm outside of history, in a disempowered private sphere or in a primitive layer of the psyche that is not yet integrated into adult consciousness," see Allen 2001, 353.
[64] *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* 2008.
[65] See Toews 1994, 123 for an analysis of the Foucaultian premise that "a subjective psychological resistance to, or transgression of, paternally defined order" is perceived as madness. In other words, we have a tendency to dismiss as mental illness anything but enthusiastic cooperation with the ruling patriarchy.

of the female in early 21st century America: she's family-oriented, submissive, and emotional; she lacks agency.[66]

2.3 Depictions of age in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*

A recurring motif in cinema is the idea of aging and all that it entails physically, emotionally, and socially. It's often present even when it doesn't appear to be a plotline. The motif is rife with an undercurrent of symbolism and can offer insight into how the culture of the intended audience perceives the aging process: does one age like fine wine or like spoiling fruit? The depiction of age may also differ between the genders. Some might argue that in early 21st century American culture, older is not wiser, at least when it comes to women. We worship the temple of youth. One must only look at the covers of fashion and lifestyle magazines to see the immense pressure women face to stay 'fresh': even magazines targeted to women in their twenties shill 'anti-aging' creams.[67] We have the overwhelming sense that women are at peak desirability soon after adolescence and as youth declines, so does value. As time goes by women have less youthful optimism to offer and become increasingly emotionally complex and 'difficult.' So it's no surprise that cinema audiences have different expectations for female characters of different ages. In *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* we see three generations of women in the same family - adolescent Gretel, middle-aged Elsa, and elderly Grandma Nathalie - who can be interpreted as symbolic of the viewer's impression of female aging.

Twelve-year-old Gretel is presented as a very agreeable and obedient 'good girl' character. The audience is supposed to like her. Right away, when Ralf breaks the news to the children that the family will be moving, Gretel announces that if her father says the move

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[66] Women are "expected to be 'feminine', that is to say, ..submissive, demure, ...self-effacing. …As a consequence, dependence on others… tends to become constitutive of their being," Bordieu, 2001, 66.

[67] For more on the "economy of symbolic goods" and "extreme attention to physical appearance," see Bourdieu 2001, 96-101.

is a good thing, she also thinks that it is a good thing. She doesn't form her own opinion but follows that of the authority figure, in this case her father. On the train east, she looks over her family and says an evening prayer, while her mother is preoccupied with filing her nails. Once the family arrives at their new location, we're given a hint of her sexuality as she giggles and hangs off the arm of the young Lieutenant Kotler as he washes the family car. It's the only implication of romance in the film - her married mother and grandmother are never portrayed as sexual beings. Aside from this scene, Gretel is not portrayed in an overtly sexual manner but she *is* portrayed as desirable.[68] When Bruno is in need of comfort he turns to his sister, not his mother. She reassures him that although their father is a soldier, he is a good man and they should be proud of him because he is "making the country great again."[69] She is honest with her brother and tells him the truth about the neighboring facility but in a delicate manner. She is nurturing. She follows the rules - she stays within the confines of the house and spends time quietly in her bedroom or in the kitchen. Gretel is also a model citizen - she is inspired by the nationalistic words of her tutor and decorates her bedroom with propaganda posters. She even adjusts her own appearance to mimic the subject of one of these posters: two long braids and a white blouse with a bandana necktie. Her appearance then remains stable for the remainder of the film (unlike, as we will see, that of her mother). Gretel represents an enthusiastic witness. While she obviously supports the Reich, she is still passive. She doesn't do anything to further or hinder its efforts.

Middle-aged Elsa, on the other hand, is an object of pity. She is always shown moving from one place to another, giving her a frenetic nature. In the rare moments when she is still her eyes remain moving, searching for something. Elsa's physical appearance varies quite a bit throughout the film. At first she is glamorous in well-pressed clothes, coiffed hair, and flawless makeup. As the film progresses, though, she's increasingly tear-stained

[68] For an examination of the "sexualized female body… as the central medium for giving meaning to Holocaust memory in a work of fiction," see Scherr 2003, 279.
[69] *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* 2008.

and dishevelled, wearing less and less makeup and less and less formal clothing. There's an air of instability around her, the audience never knows how she will look from one scene to another. Elsa is surprised and unnerved when she first sees Gretel's new patriotic room decorations. When she asks Ralf if what the tutor is teaching the children is normal, he brushes her off and says they're learning what all children need to learn so they don't get left behind. Elsa is portrayed as concerned, skeptical, unsure. But the uncertainty never leads to the reveal of an actual opinion - she lets her concerns be easily dismissed every time. Bruno repeatedly lies to his mother about leaving the garden and about what he has in his satchel, and Elsa never questions it, leading her character to appear easily duped. Elsa is not a desirable character; her instability leads the audience to pity her. Elsa represents an ambivalent witness. She seems, herself, unable to commit to either supporting or criticizing the Reich, but regardless she is still passive. She doesn't do anything to further or hinder its efforts.

We encounter grandmother Nathalie (interestingly listed in the film credits only as 'Grandma') just three times during *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* but she seems to be even more 'difficult' than Elsa. The audience is meant to be suspicious of her. She's mysterious, she obviously has something to say and clear opinions but they're never fully revealed to the audience. At the party celebrating her son's promotion, she questions his motivations, asking in a condescending manner if he's proud of his role. It seems she is not and is about to confront him, but the conversation is stifled before she is able to speak her mind. The next time Nathalie's character appears is when she refuses to accompany her husband on a visit to the family's new home in the east. As Ralf speaks sharply into the telephone we can tell she's on the other end stating her opinions about his job and his new facility, but the sound is muffled and the audience doesn't hear her complaints. Eventually Nathalie's character is killed off (her home has fallen casualty to Allied bombings), perhaps symbolizing that she's come to the end of her use. Finally at her funeral Elsa objects to her

mother-in-law being buried with a certificate of recognition from the Führer, saying "she wouldn't have wanted it."[70] This solidifies her disdain of the Reich. While Nathalie is 'difficult' and clearly disagrees with the intent of Ralf's mission, she doesn't attempt to change anyone's mind or disrupt the system. She, too, is a witness.

Gretel, Elsa, and Nathalie represent a progression from model citizen to (muffled) dissident. They represent three degrees of witness. None of the women actually does anything to actively further or hinder the Holocaust, but they progress from passive supporter, to ambivalent, to passive critic, interestingly following the classical progression of a woman's aging from most to least desirable. Mirroring this, the women desire the Reich the most when they are most desirable, and desire it the least when they are at their least desirable. Their perceived approval of Ralf's mission (perpetrating the Holocaust) mirrors and is directly proportional to the gaze. As Elsa gets the most screen time, I will analyze her role as witness more in depth.

2.4 The depiction of Lower's witness category in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*

The witness is, by definition, passive. Things happen around them but they are not the doer. When we first encounter Elsa, she is on the sidelines in the party. Visually the scene swirls around her husband Ralf, who is the one "forwarding the story, making things happen."[71] He occupies the center of the camera angle and Elsa flits around the edges. This mise-en-scène is replicated throughout the film. Ralf is most often depicted as stationary, seated, central, while Elsa is most often depicted as moving, standing, peripheral. That she is portrayed this way is no accident, nor is primarily about her as an individual. Elsa's depiction is intended to reflect the audience expectation of women of this era. She is an onlooker rather than an agent.

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[70] *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* 2008.
[71] Mulvey 1975, 12.

For the duration of the film Elsa asks all kinds of questions. She asks what kind of facility Ralf runs, what they are burning that would create such a thick black smoke to flow from the nearby chimneys, what kind of books the children read with their tutor. But she doesn't wait to hear the answer. It seems she doesn't really want to know.

When Lieutenant Kotler says "they smell even worse when they burn," Elsa looks back and forth between him and the cloud of smoke, as if calculating in her mind. He says "surely you…" and she continues looking around. She doesn't ask any further questions, neither does she confirm that she already knew. Later, when Ralf asks "who told you about this,"[72] Elsa just opens her hands and shrugs, as if to say that everyone knows (including her). Elsa represents Lower's first category: witness. She is aware of the Holocaust but does nothing to advance it or hinder it.

2.5 The filmic gaze on the passive female witness in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*

Mulvey's theory of the cinematic gaze concentrates on the relationship between viewer and film, but the same concept can also be identified among characters within the film. When a film has a clear protagonist, from whose perspective the story is told, the other characters are filtered through the protagonist's eyes. How does the protagonist 'gaze' at other characters? Because the camera takes the perspective of Bruno's gaze, the audience is guided to sympathize with and relate to the protagonist, and their own expectations are played out through the character's actions on screen. The protagonist's behavior mirrors the audience's attitudes. Thus from the protagonist's behavior, we can deduce a great deal about the cultural climate of the audience. Differences in the way the protagonist interacts with male and female characters is a prime example of this gaze.

Bruno behaves quite differently towards his mother and his father. As the film opens he is shown running around with his friends 'playing war.' When the scene cuts to the party

[72] *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* 2008.

and we see Ralf in uniform, it becomes apparent that the imitation is an act of admiration. The camera holds a close up shot of Bruno quite literally gazing at his father, nearly slack-jawed in awe. One can assume this is not the first time he has seen his father in his starched dress uniform (the party is in celebration of a promotion, not of a new career), but nonetheless his pride is palpable. Elsa is also dressed to the nines for the occasion, but Bruno does not give his mother a second glance. She is an addition to the scene rather than its central focus.

Later when the family has moved east, Bruno experiences more candor from his father than from his mother. Ralf invites his son into his office and the two sit quite formally across the desk from each other. The scene is framed with the desk in the center of the shot with father and son forming a balance at either side. Nevertheless, it's a scene of imbalance. The location of the conversation, being Ralf's domain, reinforces his sense of authority; Bruno is dwarfed by the large chair he sits in. Ralf is prepared to reveal the truth about the facility he runs. It's a difficult conversation but he feels his son can handle it. But before he can say too much about the camp's real purpose, Elsa bursts in and drags Bruno back to her own 'office' - the kitchen. She wants to protect him from the truth. In turn, Bruno reciprocates his mother's dishonesty. He doesn't respect his mother's authority. He repeatedly disregards the boundaries she has set. He doesn't value her opinion, saying it's "just stupid"[73] that Elsa doesn't think a concentration camp is a good place for children.

We see demonstrations of Bruno's gaze towards his parents even when he is not directly interacting with them, but when he is observing a scene he does not feature in. For example, he witnesses his parents arguing and the camera follows his gaze. The scene takes place in Ralf's domain, his office. When Bruno walks in, his father appears rather calm and collected, smoking a cigar, but his mother is weeping. Ralf is in the superior position, standing, and Elsa is crumpled in a chair. It's clear who has the upper hand here. Another

[73] *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* 2008.

example of Bruno's view of his parent's power imbalance is when Ralf hosts fellow soldiers to watch a propaganda film about his facility (in which the prisoners play football and have an orchestra). Bruno peeks into the viewing and hugs his father proudly when he opens the door. We see a disheveled-looking Elsa in the corner of the screen peeking out from behind a railing and sniffling.

An interesting scene exploring the parallel gaze of Bruno towards Elsa, and Ralf towards Elsa, is when they separately gaze upon her in the garden. Bruno watches through a gap in the fence and Ralf watches through the window. The camera follows each gaze in turn. The two perspectives lead to the same focus. Elsa is spinning listlessly on the tire swing, an empty wine bottle on the ground below her. The sight is one of pity. She's lost the plot, attempting to dissociate herself from a burdensome reality.[74] This scene demonstrates that Bruno and Ralf share the same opinion of Elsa, and it follows that the audience is assumed to share the opinion, too.

2.6 Conclusion - *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas, although it is purportedly about 1940s Germany, can be read as an allegory of twenty-first century America in several ways. Depictions of cultural attitudes in this 'historical' film are really more telling of the intended audience than of the portrayed subject. After all, it's intended for popular culture consumption rather than as a documentary. When we examine some underlying themes of the film - including gender and age differences - we see they are closely tied to the expectations of the audience. The film does not, on the surface, appear to be about these themes, but rather they are a byproduct of the cinematic gaze and they are reinforced time and time again, implying they hold a central position in the audience's cultural values.

[74] She is indulging in the kind of liquid escapism typical among members of the witness category, as described in Lower 2013.

The category of witness, as portrayed by the women in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is one of essential passivity. The witness is present when other people are acting, but she is not an agent of action herself. She may have an opinion of the action - positive, ambivalent, negative - but her opinion remains an emotion. The emotion does not advance into action. So in the end, she is excused from *Kriegsschuld*, war guilt: she didn't do anything, she only saw others doing. In excusing the female category of witness from *Kriegsschuld*, the film also maintains the twenty-first century American norm of female passivity and innocence.

Such norms, while depicted in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by a British filmmaker through an adaptation of an Irish novel, also reinforce preferences for passive female leads and active male leads among mainstream twenty-first century American film goers. While box office receipts indicate that this film was the least popular with American film viewers of the three I am analyzing, the fact that it has a rating of 7.8 out of 10 on IMDB, the United States' foremost audience-generated film rating and review aggregator, indicates that it appealed to at least some mainstream viewers. Its relative lack of box-office success paradoxically indicates that while it was attempting to appeal to a mass audience through clichés, it backfired with some American viewers. Nevertheless these critiques tend to be more focused on the problematic depiction of Jewish cultural history than on the problematic depiction of gender.

The reviews in several more intellectually inclined US newspapers demonstrate that savvy film critics saw through the attempt to appeal to such "kitsch."[75] Film critic Manohla Dargis, writing for the well-read, nationally syndicated, and perceived highbrow newspaper *The New York Times,* found the film banal and predictable, a tearjerker that "trivializes"[76] the tragedies of the Holocaust. She would have liked to have seen more depth, but does not

[75] Dargis 2008 "Horror Through a Child's Eyes."
[76] Dargis 2008 "Horror Through a Child's Eyes." For an exploration of whether or not "the extermination of the Jews of Europe is as accessible to both representation and interpretation as any other historical event," see Friedlander 1997, 389.

mention the very typified gender roles in the film, implying they conform to her own norms and expectations. She calls it "allegorical"[77] but does not elaborate. Is it, at least in the way that the filmmaker uses gendered roles, a nod to aspects of our own society? We take it for granted that gender was performed (to use Butler's terminology) the same way in 1940s Germany as it is in twenty-first century America. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* caters directly to this assumption of permanence, this "myth of the 'eternal feminine'."[78]

Films are cultural artifacts that at once demonstrate and propagate cultural norms. They shine light on existing norms and when viewed, teach the audience about the norms they, too, are expected to perform. Popular culture, including cinema, is a flag-bearer of the master narrative - the "dominant model for all articulations concerning the description and interpretation of history."[79] In other words, the mutually agreed upon 'story' of history that we as a culture take to be true. If we are to believe the master narrative in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, women are not to blame for the Holocaust because they were not agents of action.

The Boy in the Striped Pajama's depiction of Lower's category of witness is one that excuses her from *Kriegsschuld*. The witness didn't *do*, she just *saw*. This clear cut passivity falls into line with the audience's impression of femininity. But what about the next category, accomplice? Things get less clear cut here - the accomplice *does* but is she really *responsible*? Would the implication of unpalatable action translate into negative audience reception? Interestingly, the more nuanced depictions of femininity in *The Reader* did not prevent it from great box-office success. But as we will see, the female lead may appear strong on the surface but nonetheless relays back all the expected gender assumptions.

[77] Dargis 2008 "Horror Through a Child's Eyes."
[78] Bourdieu 2001, 4.
[79] Lenz & Heinsohn 2008, 136.

Chapter 3: *The Reader*

3.1 *The Reader*

The Reader is a 2008 film by director Stephen Daldry. It had an estimated budget of $32,000,000 and grossed $34,194,407 in the United States as a limited release feature.[80] It is based on a 1995 book by German author Bernhard Schlink titled *Der Vorleser*. It was translated to English by Carol Brown Janeway two years later under the title *The Reader*, but crucially, as we will see, the original title implies specifically a person who reads aloud, not just a person who reads. Although the director and many actors are British, the film was widely viewed in America and for the purpose of this thesis I am considering its American reception only.

The film is told from the perspective of Michael Berg and is separated into three distinct stages of his life: mid-teens, mid-twenties, and mid-forties. The former two parts are played by David Kross and the latter is played by Ralph Fiennes. We are also briefly introduced to his family members (including mother Carla, played by Susanne Lothar and father Peter, played by Matthias Habich) and various classmates, Michael's professor at Heidelberg Law School, Professor Rohl (played by Bruno Ganz), and later an American Holocaust survivor, Ilana Mather (played by Alexandra Maria Lara). Throughout the film, however, Michael's primary counterpart is Hanna Schmitz (played by Kate Winslet), and it is around her character that the film revolves.

The first section of the film takes place in 1958 Neustadt, West Germany. Fifteen year old Michael Berg falls ill in the street and is helped home by a passing woman. Later that spring, after having convalesced from his illness, he wishes to thank this kind stranger so returns to the apartment block where he was rescued and looks around until he finds her. The woman is reluctant to accept his gratitude, instead asking "Have you always been

[80] IMDB: keyword "The Reader."

weak?"[81] She says she must go to work, that if he waits while she changes they can walk together. Michael waits in the hallway outside her studio apartment watching her get dressed. When he realizes the woman has noticed his attention, he gets flustered and runs away.

Michael returns the next day to apologize and learns her name: Hanna. What follows is a summer-long affair. Between romantic interludes what Hanna likes most of all is for Michael to read to her; she demands more and more. It doesn't matter whether it's *Huckleberry Finn* or *The Odyssey*, she is entranced by Michael's readings. One day, Michael races up to her apartment as usual but it is empty. Hanna has moved out without saying goodbye. Although Michael is unaware, the audience sees that she had been offered a promotion at her workplace.

We then flash forward eight years to 1966 Heidelberg where the now twenty-three year old Michael is attending law school. The class has the opportunity to witness the trial of a handful of women, prison guards, involved in the death of 300 Jewish women following the evacuation of Auschwitz in 1944. It had been spurred on by the publication of a memoir by a survivor of the incident. Central to the trial, and the law class itself, is the idea of *Kriegsschuld* - who is responsible for the Holocaust. Did merely knowing about it and not doing anything to stop it imply guilt? How about just following orders? Or does the blame lie only on the masterminds? Professor Rohl says that legally, guilt lies purely in the perpetrators:

> Societies think they operate by something called morality. But they don't. They operate by something called law. You're not guilty of anything merely by working at Auschwitz. Eight thousand people worked at Auschwitz. Precisely nineteen have been convicted, and only six for murder. To prove murder you have to prove intent.

[81] *The Reader* 2008.

> That's the law. Remember, the question is never ‘Was it wrong?' but ‘Was it legal?' And not by our laws, no, by the laws at the time.[82]

Michael’s classmate, however, is outraged at the idea of legal guilt not encompassing what he believes to be moral guilt, shouting:

> I started out believing in this trial, I thought it was great, now I think it's just a diversion… You choose six women, you put them on trial, you say ‘They were the evil ones, they were the guilty ones'. Brilliant! Because one of the victims happened to write a book! That's why they're on trial and nobody else. Do you know how many camps there were in Europe? People go on about how much did everyone know? ‘Who knew?' ‘What did they know?' Everyone knew! Our parents, our teachers. That isn't the question. The question is ‘How could you let it happen?' And - better - ‘Why didn't you kill yourself when you found out?'[83]

It’s not made clear what Michael thinks, and the audience is left with the idea as food for thought. It is clear that there is intended to be no easy, straightforward answer to the question of *Kriegsschuld*.

As the trial opens, Michael recognizes one of the defendants: it’s Hanna Schmitz. Over the course of the trial it becomes apparent that Hanna is illiterate. However, she does not want to admit it and ends up taking responsibility for the authorization of the incident that lead to the deaths of three hundred of her prisoners - although she couldn’t have, because it would have involved reading and signing an authorization document. Hannah is sentenced to life in prison while her co-defendants receive a few years each, as they were deemed accomplices rather than perpetrators.

Here the film flashes forward several more years to the late 1980s, and we see Michael is now in his mid-forties: divorced, a father, and a lawyer. While going through some old books, he comes across those that he read to Hannah many decades ago. He gets the

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[82] *The Reader* 2008.
[83] *The Reader* 2008.

idea to teach her how to read by sending her books and tapes of himself reading aloud so that she can follow along. We see a montage of him recording and Hanna, now in her early fifties and nearly unrecognizable in appearance, listening, following along and circling letters and words in the books. Eventually she is competent enough to write letters to Michael. She writes a series of short letters, requests for different books. Michael receives them and saves them but never writes back.

After serving decades of her sentence, Hanna is now up for release. Michael has been contacted by the prison social worker because he's her only known contact and he agrees to find her an apartment and a job. He goes to visit her and asks if she's thought about the past - she seems puzzled and thinks he's talking about their relationship. He clarifies that he means her actions leading to her prison sentence. Hannah dismissively replies that her thoughts about the past don't matter because they don't change the past. He asks if she has learned anything, and she says she has learned to read.

When Michael returns the following week to pick her up, the prison social worker says that Hanna took her own life earlier that morning: "She didn't pack. She never intended to leave."[84]

3.2 Overview of male and female roles in *The Reader*

Right from the beginning of the film, before we even meet Hanna, a tone of gendered behavior is set - when the teenage Michael is ill his mother is concerned and thinks he should visit a doctor, but his father dismisses her concerns because Michael says he's fine, saying "We're not going to argue about this. People have to take responsibility for their own lives."[85] As it turns out, Carla's concerns were valid - Michael *did* need to see a doctor, he had scarlet fever and took months to recover. This early allusion to personal responsibility is interesting given the overarching theme of the film.

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[84] *The Reader* 2008.
[85] *The Reader* 2008.

Hanna and Michael's relationship is complex. On the one hand, it begins when he is a teenager and she is a full-grown woman. On the other, there are also gender and class imbalances at hand.[86]

The cornerstone of Michael's identity is that of an intellectual - first we see him as a high school student, then as a law student, and then finally as a lawyer.[87] He is intelligent and philosophical; he lives within his mind rather than with physical actions. A great amount of screen time is given to his academic abilities. As a teenager he charms Hannah with books and by speaking Latin and classical Greek. He's portrayed as a hardworking student in law school - we see a wide shot of his apartment building and the other students party while he studies. When he reconnects to Hannah he does so through literature. Michael is concerned about principles, not just practicalities.

Hanna is portrayed as much more of a straightforward, surface level character. While she can be driven by emotion (for example, she snaps at teenage Michael when she doesn't like the book he reads and we learn during her trial that she picked favorite prisoners at the concentration camp), there is a pointed lack of insight into her beliefs and goals. Hanna is concerned about practicalities, not principles. Hanna is shown as being physically hard working. She's sweaty when she comes home from work and she spends a lot of time scrubbing her apartment. It's apparent that Hanna comes from a lower class background than Michael does. Right away we see that she works as a tram conductor, a profession that although legitimate and respectable, does not require a great deal of education. We later learn that she cannot read or write, implying she has not been educated at all (although she is able to learn later in life, seemingly easily, which would rule out a developmental or learning disorder as the reason for her illiteracy). We don't gain any insight into Hanna's personal life as we do Michael's. We don't know where she's from, whether she has parents

[86] For a discussion on the historiographical visibility of class - gender intersectionality in Germany, see Canning 2010.
[87] For more on the perception of intellectualism and certain professions, namely law, as dominant and particularly male realms, see Bourdieu, 2001, 105-106.

or siblings, colleagues or friends. It is known, however, that work in the Third Reich's eastern reaches (including concentration camps) was a prime means of "upward mobility"[88] for young women with otherwise poor prospects. While Hanna appeared to have agency in her choice to become a concentration camp guard (she says during her trial that she specifically applied for the position), she is very much portrayed as a woman without options. She applied for the job because her options were so limited, and she was at the mercy of others' direction when she got there. Again, at the trial she goes along with the received narrative rather than defending herself and unfairly ends up shouldering the blame because of her inability to speak up.

Although on the surface, Hanna is portrayed as someone rather in control of her life, she is actually a woman without a great deal of agency. She's older than Michael during their affair, but his ability to read (and her obsession with it) gives him the upper hand. When she left without saying goodbye to Michael, it wasn't because she chose to but because she couldn't accept the promotion she'd been given at work that would entail working in an office. It's Michael who initiates contact during Hanna's prison sentence, but her attempts at correspondence go unanswered when he refuses to reply to the letters she sends, instead maintaining an emotional barrier by sending only book recordings. The only act of control Hanna exerts on her own destiny is when she commits suicide.

3.3 Depictions of age in *The Reader*

Just as women of different ages are depicted differently in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, *The Reader*'s female lead Hanna is portrayed differently in her youth than she is in more advanced age. The particular traits depicted are not necessarily identical, but the subtext is: while women do not gain or lose any real power as they age - they remain in a lower status than men - they do lose desirability. We encounter Hanna in two distinct life

[88] Bock 1998, 89.

phases: when she is in her twenties (for the purpose of analysis I will refer to this stage as 'young Hanna') and again when she is in her fifties (a far cry from elderly but as we will see, she is presented as such in this stage; for the purpose of analysis I will refer to this stage as 'old Hanna.').

In her youth, Hanna is depicted as a physically beautiful but rather one-dimensional character. The emphasis is on her physicality rather than emotional or intellectual depth. As previously mentioned she is often depicted engaging in manual labor - scrubbing something instead of sitting and thinking. There are many scenes of 'young Hanna's' actual or implied nudity, and even when she is clothed her dresses show off muscular arms and legs. Although she is older and could be the one in charge in their relationship, Hanna is often depicted deferring decisions to Michael. For example, she has him order for her when they eat in a restaurant together (she cannot read the menu but the table next to theirs makes a joke about how all restaurants serve the same dishes, implying that at this time and place there was a selection of things that could reliably be expected in any restaurant and Hanna's inability to read the menu would not have been revealed had she picked one of those dishes). On the same outing Michael shows her the map but instead of nodding along, she tells him: "It's okay, kid. I don't want to know."[89]

In maturity, Hanna is depicted as a shell of her old self. Before letting Michael in to visit Hanna in prison, the social worker says "I should warn you: for a long time Hanna held herself together. She was very purposeful. In the last few years she's different. She's let herself go."[90] She feels the need to prepare him, as if the mere sight of an older woman was something that might shock or disturb Michael. Remember, he has aged just as many years as Hanna has, but there is not a parallel scene of the social worker warning Hanna that he might look different than when they last saw each other (indeed, while Michael has not escaped the marks of time, his transformation is far more subtle than Hanna's). It's certainly

[89] *The Reader* 2008.
[90] *The Reader* 2008.

not implied that Michael's aging is due to any fault of his own, through 'letting himself go.' Physically, 'old Hanna' has put on weight since we last saw her and wears frumpier clothes with more coverage. She moves more slowly. Her skin is rougher, drier, heavily lined. But what is most striking is the change in her coloring. Hanna has literally faded as she has aged. Her hair, loose rather than neatly tied back as in earlier scenes, is pure white. Her blue eyes seem to be clouding with the beginning stages of cataracts. Her complexion, once peaches and cream, is instead sallow and pallid. She looks fragile. Any semblance of strength Hanna had had in her youth came from her physicality.

Hanna's vitality fades as she ages but she does not gain any depth of character. Unlike the women in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* her temperament does not change as she ages, but even their having an opinion didn't matter because it didn't translate to an increase in agency over their own lives. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* used a change of personality to represent a woman's decline in desirability with age and *The Reader* used a change in physical appearance to represent the same. The point being: even women who are beautiful or obedient enjoy no more power than those who are haggard or disagreeable. Rather, "...women's choices and actions are explained only by sexualized, emotionalized, and privatized motivations."[91] In contrast, men are depicted as being concerned with the bigger picture - in Ralf's case the health of the nation and in Michael's case the guilt of the nation.

3.4 The depiction of Lower's accomplice category in *The Reader*

Hanna represents Lower's second category, accomplice: those women who "were more than witnesses to the mass murder; they… stole from the Jews, administered the genocide, and participated at the crime scenes."[92] Hanna worked as a prison guard and had a hand in the terrors of the Holocaust, but she was not an engineer of these terrors; she was

[91] Lenz & Heinsohn 2008, 146.
[92] Lower 2013, 118-119.

not in charge. Hanna's illiteracy can be taken as an allegory for her inability to read the situation (or write the situation) she was in during the Third Reich.[93] She was playing to someone else's script, rather than writing her own.

By depicting Hanna as illiterate the filmmaker makes clear her position as accomplice rather than perpetrator. Not only does she say on the witness stand that she was just following orders, in actuality it was not possible for her to have been doing any more than that. We don't have to take her word for it. A supervisory or planning role would have required more intellectual ability than Hanna was capable of. In this sense Hanna, as the accomplice, is relieved in the eyes of the protagonist and by proxy the audience, of true *Kriegsschuld*. Michael argues with his professor that Hanna should not be found guilty because the judge does not know just how incapable she is. He feels sorry for Hanna for bearing the burden of others' bad decisions; however there is no dialogue of him considering the immorality of what she was able to control: voluntarily signing up for a job as a concentration camp guard. Michael does not discuss with his professor why she might have chosen that job, nor does he ask her in their later conversations. It's taken as a given that she somehow had no other option.

3.5 The filmic gaze on the passive female accomplice in *The Reader*

As in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas,* the protagonist's perspective in *The Reader* is used as a visual proxy for the audience's perspective. Camera angles follow the point of view of Michael rather than that of Hanna or of any other character. It is rare for a scene to be shown without him present and in the center. In this way, the audience's gaze is played out through Michael's gaze.

[93] Which, in turn, "might be read as a cultural metaphor apologetically alluding to Germans who were presumably 'not in the know' about what was happening to Jews under the Nazis," LaCapra 2014, 202.

In the early part of the film Hanna is an object of desire. Repeated camera angles show Michael observing Hanna when she does not know she is being watched. The reverse, on the other hand, is never shown. Before he even knows her name, there is a scene of Michael watching Hanna undress. The camera angle mimics what the protagonist sees. He is in the public space of the apartment hallway peering into the private space of Hanna's apartment. The hallway is dim and the apartment bright, mirroring the 'illumination' of his sexual awakening. Later, the scene repeats itself when Michael watches her in the church enjoying the choir. It's midday and the outside light is bright but inside the church is dim. The camera focuses on Michael's face as he studies Hanna watching the choir. It's as if he has realized there might be more to Hanna than the surface layer that has thus far been portrayed. Does she, too, have interests and preferences? The play of light and darkness and public vs private sphere in this scene is interesting - the same moment when Michael first appears curious about Hanna's internal world is one when she is in a dim location, the contrast emphasised by light forming streams through the windows. Perhaps her internal being, her own private sphere, though surrounded by external sunshine, is also dark? But before the foreshadowing can be developed, the scene cuts and the film moves on.

Despite the age difference, Michael and Hanna's romance is portrayed as aspirational rather than predatory in nature. She is clearly the object of his heterosexual desire. Hanna doesn't need to groom or seduce Michael in any way, he is a willing and active participant in their affair. The camera follows many a scene of Michael running or hurriedly biking towards Hanna's apartment as a demonstration of his eagerness. She is always a destination. She is a physical destination during their affair and a mental destination afterwards, she puts a face to the theoretical *Kriegsschuld* Michael studies in school when he observes her trial from the courtroom gallery.

In later scenes, as Hanna has aged, the audience retains the cinematic gaze through Michael's perspective. She is no longer an object of his desire but of his pity. Hanna, being a

prisoner, is physically caged and her personality is muted, as well. The camera no longer features closeups of her in the bathtub but wide shots of her (fully clothed) in a stark prison visiting room. When Michael visits her in prison she is kept at arm's length. The camera places the physical barrier of a table between the pair. The meeting room in the prison is brightly lit in cold, white light. Their relationship is now brightly lit, as well: no secrets remain. Hanna is shown in a dehumanized way because she's lost the only thing that gave her value, her youthful beauty.

3.6 Conclusion - *The Reader*

The Reader, although it is purportedly about the shame of illiteracy during wartime Germany and subsequent postwar West Germany, has a lot to say about gender relations in twenty-first century America. The underlying theme of the film is guilt and its relationship to agency. The male lead and female lead are depicted in markedly different ways and this inequality is indicative of the audience's expectations. Men occupy the intellectual sphere and women the physical. Men make decisions and women follow them. Time and again the filmmaker portrays Hanna as a woman without options. She is merely a passenger in her life, swept away by the tide of others' decisions.

The category of accomplice, as portrayed by Hanna in *The Reader,* is one of essential passivity. The accomplice acts only on the accord of others; she is not self-starting. She does not have control of the actions she takes. She cannot choose what happens to her. The accomplice is doomed to be a puppet acting out someone else's intentions due to an innate lack of her own power. She simply isn't capable of more. Hanna is "portrayed as peripheral, helpless, and fragile."[94] So in the end, she is excused from *Kriegsschuld*: she didn't mastermind anything, she only did what she was told. In excusing the female category

[94] Horowitz 1998, 367.

of accomplice from *Kriegsschuld*, the cultural norm of female passivity and innocence are maintained.

New York Times critic Manohla Dargis describes this film, again, as one to appeal to the masses. She's not wrong - it has an IMDB rating of 7.6 out of 10. The film was a commercial success, implying that it played to audience preferences. Dargis recognizes that *The Reader* is about the "past informing the present" but fails to recognize that it is also about the present informing the past.[95] Historians know that the past does not live in isolation from the present (Robert Braun goes as far as to question whether historical representation is "a mode of meaning production rather than a re-enactment of the past"[96]), but popular culture seems less cognizant of the relationship. The implication is touched upon but not outright stated. Dargis recognizes that *The Reader* "is neither about the Holocaust nor about those Germans who grappled with its legacy"[97] but fails to recognize what the film *is*, at least in part, about: contemporary America's view on gender as it relates to guilt and responsibility. She asks "who, exactly, wants or perhaps needs to see another movie about the Holocaust that embalms its horrors with artfully spilled tears and asks us to pity a death-camp guard"[98] but wherein lies the significance of the storyteller choosing the role of pity to be embodied by a female character rather than a male? Again her complaints about the film center on the attempt to sensationalize Jewish victimhood for financial gain rather than on the cliché gender roles that are woven throughout the film.

Dargis affirms that the leading lady will be the one to steal the show, to propel the film's success with audiences and in award season. Her perceived beauty and inculpability will satisfy what Mulvey terms the male gaze. But isn't this, too, exploitation? Clouded by her own cultural biases, Dargis doesn't object. The film is amass with gender biases but because they are so entrenched as cultural norms, the American critic (and by proxy the

[95] Dargis 2008 "Innocence Is Lost in Postwar Germany."
[96] Braun 1997, 418. See also Munslow 1997.
[97] Dargis 2008 "Innocence Is Lost in Postwar Germany."
[98] Dargis 2008 "Innocence Is Lost in Postwar Germany."

audience) doesn't even notice them. It's not startling for a woman to play the beautiful fool; it's the path to critical acclaim. *The Reader*'s relative success implies that its portrayals remain firmly within the American comfort zone. Though it depicts female involvement in the Holocaust, it avoids alienating audiences by stripping the female lead of any sense of agency. The female lead is placed firmly in the accomplice category - too incapable to have actually been guilty of anything. Our (American) view of femininity remains untainted.

The cinematic portrayals of females in Lower's first two categories of witness and accomplice in 2008 were followed by a 2009 blockbuster featuring a very different portrayal of a male in her third category of perpetrator. As we will see, this portrayal provides a counterweight to the previous two and exploits the same gendered caricatures to satisfy the expectations of the twenty-first century American audience and ensure its commercial success.

Chapter 4: *Inglourious Basterds*

4.1 *Inglourious Basterds*

While early twenty-first century Hollywood has given us examples of Lower's witness and accomplice categories, thus far there has been a dearth of box office hits featuring her third category, the perpetrator. There has, however, been a smash hit featuring a male perpetrator: *Inglourious Basterds*. In general this one diverges from the others (as the first two categories of witness and accomplice diverge from the third of perpetrator). Released the following year, its strong, capable male lead serves as a complement to the weak and incapable female leads of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and *The Reader*. It does, however, also feature two strong female leads. Crucially, though, they are not Nazis but members of the resistance. Their portrayal of female strength and agency on the side of the 'good guys' contrasts the previous depictions of female weakness and submission on the side of the 'bad guys.'

Inglourious Basterds is a 2009 film by American director Quentin Tarantino. It had an estimated budget of $75,000,000 and grossed $120,540,719 in the USA as a wide release feature.[99] These sales figures represent a popularity an order of magnitude greater than either *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* or *The Reader*. The cast features a range of actors from the United States, Germany, Austria, and France. It was widely viewed in America and for the purpose of this thesis I am considering its American reception only.

As expected with a Tarantino film, the plot of *Inglourious Basterds* is long and winding. Ultimately, though, it is a film about two simultaneous plots to end World War Two in the Allies' favor by killing the 'big four' of Nazi high command: Hitler, Goebbels, Göring, Bormann. Interestingly, the lead role in the film, from whose perspective it is primarily told, is S.S. Colonel Hans 'The Jew Hunter' Landa, played by Christoph Waltz. The film also features Brad Pitt as American Lieutenant Aldo 'The Apache' Raine and his ragtag bunch of

[99] IMDB: keyword "Inglourious Basterds."

Nazi hunters (including Sergeant Donny 'The Bear Jew' Donowitz played by Eli Roth and Sergeant Hugo Stiglitz played by Til Schweiger). We also see two female leads. Diane Kruger plays Bridget von Hammersmark, a German film star turned double agent working with Aldo Raine and company. Mélanie Laurent plays Shosanna Dreyfus, a French Jew living under the alias Emmanuelle Mimieux, who owns and operates the cinema she burns down while hosting the premier of the latest Nazi propaganda film. It is noted that the film tends to refer to male characters by their last name and female characters by their first name, so for continuity I will maintain the same convention in this analysis.

The great box-office success of *Inglourious Basterds* makes it an excellent case study of early twenty-first century American preferences for the depictions of gender roles during the Third Reich. Its popularity implies a resonance with contemporary cultural norms rather than an emphasis on historical accuracy.

4.2 The depiction of Lower's perpetrator category in *Inglourious Basterds*

The filmmaker equips protagonist Hans Landa with all the classically male traits we saw in male characters *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and *The Reader*. In doing so this embodiment of Lower's perpetrator category digresses from the previous films' respective embodiments of her witness and accomplice categories, just as this category's place in *Kriegsschuld*, war guilt, does.

Landa is presented as a capable, practical, level-headed, and likeable character. He's quick witted and is able to see through other characters' attempts to deceive him. For example, in the beginning of the film he visits a home suspected of concealing a local Jewish family. He immediately sees through the homeowner's lies, locates the stowaways, and dispatches them, all while remaining calm and superbly polite. Landa makes his own decisions and gets what he wants. He's someone with a lot of agency. He always seems to be the one steering the course of events. Near the end of the film, when he discovers the

plot to eliminate his high command is already mid-process, he 'makes a deal' with the Allies. But he is the one leading the conversation, announcing the terms of the arrangement. Even when he is handcuffed he ends up looking like the cat who got the cream, rather than someone who just capitulated.[100]

Though Lower's work focuses on the different ways that women, in particular, enabled the Holocaust, her categories can also be applied to men. Landa falls squarely into her third category, perpetrator. By showing him ordering the murder of Jews in France he's unabashidely an actor in "the Nazi system of genocidal warfare and imperial rule."[101] The filmmaker does not delve into his personal motivations, implying that the audience expects someone like him in this role. We don't need an explanation because yes, of course this is what the people who were responsible for the Holocaust looked like: dominant, unemotional, and above all - male. The film's popularity with early twenty-first century American audiences implies that they approve of this depiction.

4.3 The depiction of female roles in *Inglourious Basterds*

The two female leads in *Inglourious Basterds*, however, despite being active members of the resistance, are portrayed in a passive manner more consistent with the stereotypical portrayal of female roles in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and *The Reader*.

Bridget von Hammersmark plays the crucial link for the Allies to be able to overthrow the Nazis. Without her 'in,' the plot would not work. Shouldn't she be given a central role in the film? Instead she is cast into an 'also starring' role. The filmmaker doesn't provide her any backstory or explain her motivations, as he does for the male Allies. Bridget is not given any solo scenes of her own. She is only shown in relation to the film's male characters, a

[100] To portray Landa otherwise would be uncomfortable for the audience because it would challenge their expectations of the masculine: "the threat of a collapse of the masculine into the abjected feminine threatens to dissolve the heterosexual axis of desire; it carries the fear of occupying a site of homosexual abjection," Butler 2011, 155.
[101] Lower 2013, 6.

mere "*Bedarfsartikel deutscher Männer*"[102] or useful object for German men. She could have been an inspiring character, after all she went against the tide to stand up for what she apparently believes in. Not an easy feat, but she succeeds. She takes a bullet to the leg during a shootout, gets patched up by a veterinarian without anesthesia, and wears high heels the next day. She is by any measure a tough character, or at least capable of being shown as one, but the filmmaker chooses not to focus on her strength.

Likewise, Shosanna Dreyfus could have been portrayed as a really strong and admirable character. She autonomously escapes victimization during Landa's massacre early in the film to reappear later not only as a single woman owning and operating her own business but one with plans to single handedly topple a nation that managed to managed to bring the world to its knees for over a decade.[103] But these accomplishments, these acts of strength, are just an aside. More screen time is given to Shosanna as the object of male infatuation.[104] The camera frequently lingers on her in tight angles, mirroring this male gaze. We see, for example, a montage of her applying makeup as 'war paint' and then a striking frame of her sillhouetted in a window, the red of her lips matching the red of her nails matching the red of her dress matching the red of the Nazi flag outside. No screen time is given to admiring male characters' outward appearance.

Bridget and Shosanna are not given central roles in *Inglourious Basterds*, despite the plot of the film revolving around the actions of their characters. Their characters lack depth, but they do fall directly into early twenty-first century American gender stereotypes. They fail to stand out to the audience - the filmmaker fails to *make* them stand out - because they meet the expectations of cultural preference. Thus they easily shrink into the background and become just part of the scenery. The women uphold the moral high ground but do not

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[102] Grossmann 2010, 216.
[103] For more information about Aryan-passing Jewish women's coping strategies during the Holocaust and the resulting "severe psychological stress" see Kremer 2003, 270-271.
[104] For a discussion of the intersectional experience of Jewish women and how it relates to the "media's sexualization of the Holocaust," see Ringelheim 1998, 340-350.

gain any attention or praise for doing so, deferring instead to their male counterparts. The audience can thus maintain their belief that women did not perpetrate the Holocaust, as that was the domain of men like Landa. Yet again, women escape the burden of *Kriegsschuld* in this Third Reich film.

4.4 Conclusion - *Inglourious Basterds*

In her 2009 review "Tarantino Avengers in Nazi Movieland" Manohla Dargis gives *Inglourious Basterds* a mixed review. She calls it "interminable"[105] but is clearly taken with Hans Landa's character. She calls the film's "gleeful embrace... of the seductive Nazi villain" the "film's most egregious failure" yet she gushes over his "unctuious charm."[106] Dargis knows that she shouldn't admire the Nazi perpetrator protagonist, but she does. She says she finds his description of Jews "ghastly" but that his "performance is so very good, so persuasive, seductive and, crucially, so distracting that you can readily move past the moment if you choose."[107] The film's 8.3 rating on IMDB suggests that the wider American viewership has similarly fallen for Landa's allure.[108]

Dargis' review revolves around the "tastelessness"[109] of the film's glorification of the Holocaust, saying that Tarantino is well known for "push[ing] hard against accepted norms" [110] - but does he here, really? The sheer likability of the characters - including Landa, who one would expect to come across as a villain rather than a hero - implies he plays directly into accepted norms rather than deviating from them. What makes the characters so likeable is their one-dimensional adherence to twenty-first century American gender roles. Why is Landa perceived as a hero and not as a villain? The Nazi perpetrator is, in the American psyche, offered as the antithesis to everything we hold dear. But Landa doesn't cross our

[105] Dargis 2009 "Tarantino Avengers in Nazi Movieland."
[106] Dargis 2009 "Tarantino Avengers in Nazi Movieland."
[107] Dargis 2009 "Tarantino Avengers in Nazi Movieland."
[108] IMDB: keyword "Inglourious Basterds."
[109] Dargis 2009 "Tarantino Avengers in Nazi Movieland."
[110] Dargis 2009 "Tarantino Avengers in Nazi Movieland."

cultural preferences, he displays them on a magnified scale. He plays such a strong, purposeful male we don't even care what side he's on.

Similarly flattened are the female roles in *Inglourious Basterds*. Dargis barely mentions Bridget or Shosanna, who as resistance fighters in plots that end successfully surely should have been seen as the stars of the show. They are just "elbowing for attention,"[111] apparently unsuccessfully. The women fail to catch Dargis' attention because they somehow fall into the expected trope of the woman as supporting actress rather than leading lady. While Bridget and Shosanna show more agency than the women in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and *The Reader*, they maintain the moral high ground so the strength is not seen as anomalous enough to divert the viewer's attention.

Again, as with her reviews of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and *The Reader*, Dargis' review of *Inglourious Basterds* hints that there may be something problematic with the oversimplified roles portrayed in the film. But because of an inability to see her own cultural biases, she fails to hit the nail on the head. In actuality, the film's problematic nature comes from the stereotyped depictions of male and female characters. The blinders of this *New York Times* reviewer towards the stereotypical depictions of male and female characters mirror the cultural blind spots of the wider American culture. *Inglourious Basterds*, even more so than the two previously discussed films, is yet another example of the intractability of modern gender roles in American culture played out through a period film.

[111] Dargis 2009 "Tarantino Avengers in Nazi Movieland."

Chapter 5: Conclusion

As we can see, films purportedly about another time and place are actually ripe for analysis of contemporary culture. The representations on screen reflect present realities, rather than historical fact. Films that do not, on the surface, seem to be about gender issues, are, in fact, fraught with gender issues. How do we choose to remember past events in light of current *doxa*? Borrowing Bourdieu's words, "one has to ask what are the *historical* mechanism responsible for the *relative dehistoricization* and *eternalization* of the structure of the sexual division and the corresponding principles of division… to point out what appears, in history, as being eternal is merely the product of a labor of eternalization performed by interconnected institutions such as the family, the church, the state, the educational system, and also, in another order of things, sport and journalism."[112] Film is used as a means to represent, recreate, and reaffirm cultural values. By showing history in a certain light, we are actually showing ourselves in a certain light.

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw three commercially successful Hollywood films depicting the three categories Wendy Lower has described in *Hitler's Furies*. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and *The Reader* feature women in the more passive and inculpable witness and accomplice categories, respectively. *Inglourious Basterds* features a man in the active and culpable category of perpetrator, leaving women in more passive and inculpable roles. The gendered positioning of characters holds great significance. When interpreted in terms of Laura Mulvey's cinematic gaze, we are able to detect cultural undertones of the intended audience and understand echoes of the heteronormative, androcentric hegemony illustrated by Judith Butler and Pierre Bourdieu years before. Cinematic portrayals provide evidence of deeply rooted beliefs and preferences. The commercial success of all three films implies a level of resonance with the audience; the

[112] Bourdieu 2001, vii-viii.

viewer felt secure with the ideas shown on-screen. Mainstream film reviews confirm this position.

Although the modern American patriarchy is not kind to women it does provide German women of the Third Reich an alibi to *Kriegsschuld* in the collective memory: a "tendency to glorify women's culture."[113] Women, although sometimes inept or emotional, hold the moral high ground. They are passive and simply lack the authority and agency to have engineered a genocide. Evil remains a male realm.

The Nazi, to this day, is used to embody the antithesis of Americanness. However, when depicted in a way that is consistent with contemporary gender values, even Nazis remain pleasing to American audiences. If we see our own values reflected on-screen, we remain satisfied consumers. We choose to remember the Holocaust as a male pursuit, that the women involved were only ever witnesses and accomplices, rather than perpetrators, because we don't want to challenge our own view of femininity. In our culture femininity is equated with passivity and we would like to believe that it was during the time of the Third Reich, as well. We like to think of gender as static. Reality is more real if it is constant. But what if popular culture expanded to include depictions of what academia already acknowledges: "the research… on female witnesses, accomplices, and perpetrators shows that women did exhibit the same behaviors and motivations as men… Genocide is also women's business."[114] It would be interesting to see how a film challenging this prevailing assumption otherwise would be received. Would we see the female perpetrator as an anomalous 'other' or would we be ready to question our own 'reality'?[115] Would we take a closer look in the mirror?

[113] Bos 2003, 29.
[114] Lower 2013,163 & 166.
[115] For a discussion on history as a "curative science" for society's ills, see Foucault 1997, 126.

We make our history ourselves, primarily under very specific presuppositions and conditions. Among these the economic ones are ultimately decisive; but also political ones and others, even tradition, haunting the heads of men, all play a role, even if not the decisive one.

-Friedrich Engels[116]

[116] Glaser 1981, 152.

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